

Muscle up for fair trade

Next president must push hard to open foreign markets to U.S. goods

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The United States cannot back away from free trade nor put the globalization genie back in a bottle. But the next administration has to do far more to ensure fair trade, using the muscle of the American market to make sure everyone is playing by the same basic rules.

American manufacturing doesn't need protection from the global economy; it needs access and a president who will be aggressive about maintaining it.

Working through the World Trade Organization, which the United States was instrumental in establishing 15 years ago, the goal of U.S. trade policy should be pretty simple: fairness, both ways, a concept not yet widely accepted in the every-nation-for-itself realm of global commerce.

Everybody wants access to the American market. Fine. But if you want to ship stuff here, open your markets there to U.S.-made goods -- and all the way. Enforce intellectual property laws that are supposed to protect ideas from being stolen and copied. And don't send those knockoffs here.

If you want to sell something here, then make it here or make it right, which means make it safe for American consumers. Call it a form of protectionism, if you want, but what's wrong with the U.S. government getting serious about protecting people in this country from shoddy, unsafe or illegal copycat products through much more thorough cargo inspections at all U.S. ports of entry?

At the very least, the federal government should require all importers to do a better job of policing their suppliers, especially on food and medicine, or face severe penalties for letting bad stuff into the country. Why should Americans always have to wait until somebody gets sick or hurt before there's a recall?

The immediate result of such forthright practices on trade might be some grief for American importers and exporters and, yes, higher prices for U.S. consumers on some goods. But there also will be new opportunities abroad for American businesses, better quality imports and, most important, a consistent set of rules for global commerce.

Foreign suppliers may resist, but once they realize the United States is serious, they'll come around, and probably pretty quickly. China already has taken steps on standards and quality since the well-publicized lead contamination and other problems with Chinese exports. Nobody wants to be cut out of the American market, and America needs to make more use of that leverage.

Muscle up

With a gap of \$222 billion-plus just this year between what the United States imports and exports, it's clear that this country has to muscle up on trade. There can't be that much of a chasm between what we want from the rest of the world and what the rest of the world wants from us. The trouble is too much of the world erects barriers to U.S. goods and services, or rips off U.S. ideas, and the United States just doesn't do enough about it.

Seriously, South Korea sells 700,000 cars a year in the United States and Detroit sells 4,500 a year in South Korea? Who decided that was a good balance? Did Americans even get a vote?

The problem is that American trade policy has for too long been mainly premised on bringing bargain prices to American consumers, making the United States the world's flea market. Send us your junk, your forgeries, your underpriced goods made by underpaid workers yearning to breathe better air ...

The premise should be fairness, mutual benefit and filling needs. Trade should be good for the economies of both partners, not hurting or exploiting people on either side. Yes, commerce is all about the bottom line, and in the global economy, you can always find someplace to make things cheaper if that's your goal. But if you don't have access to markets

because of the way you do things, the bottom line changes and the goal changes. American trade policy should be about raising the bottom line.

Not protectionist

Despite the rhetoric coming chiefly from the Democratic candidates for president about cheap foreign labor stealing U.S. manufacturing jobs, the reality is that most of those jobs -- at least 90% -- have been eliminated due to production efficiencies, automation and declining sales in North America. In the global economy, there is no place for tariff-based protectionism.

The future is in free markets -- through which the United States can export not only goods but also the concepts of capitalism and democracy. Nothing could do more to undermine America's enemies than global economic progress with America in a leadership role.

In addition to a tough trade policy based on two-way fairness, the next president has to acknowledge that a holistic approach to the global economy also includes home-front help for what amounts to a generation of displaced factory workers. Opportunities have to be established for education and training, and "bridge" help has to be available for those who pursue them.

The State of Michigan's No Worker Left Behind program is an example of an approach that can be broadened to other states and expanded, using the nation's community colleges as retraining centers.

In a political year, it is much easier to blame global trade for the troubles besetting American workers than to talk about what can be done for those workers and what they ought to be doing for themselves.

This country does need a tougher approach to trade that demands fairness and adherence to international rules and standards. We do need to put the muscle of the American market behind those demands. But that's not going to bring back manufacturing jobs. Instead, it should create opportunities for which former manufacturing workers must be prepared.